Lasmigona

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a poem for Kentucky

White-breasted harrier on a fence,

red-shouldered hawk in a tree,

big mussel at the bottom of the lake,

small muscle in my eyelid twitching —

the whole world is out there,

waiting, warning, *watching*.

I live near the nursing home, so

I know about the slow ambulances.

I've lived near the river, and now

I know about the fish kills in the spring.

I know all about the garden on the prison farm and

I know about the turquoise water in the bottom of the limestone quarry.

I'm familiar with our small towns—

the loud speakers on a Crown Vic,

the Guatemalan flag in a neighbor’s window,

the strip-mall churches and vape shops,

the kids playing soccer by the cemetery.

They play soccer right next to the tombstones.

The bodies of the past and the present,

all in one place.

I’m familiar with the state’s resources.

The underground veins of coal —

the old lifeblood of the state.

But the state's veins are also shaped like rivers—

with more waterways than any other state in the east,

with more coastline than Florida.

Barge workers curse and clean and stand watch,

looming over the channel like the hawks

in the trees on our ragged shores.

On the Cumberland River, bodies slip in

and out of bikinis—

and on the Ohio River,

on the scenic overlooks, bodies threaten

to slide out of motorcycle mama riding gear.

The river has its own culture,

leaving its traces all the way down

to the backend of Kentucky.

Empty barges and riverside hookup spots,

frantic make-out sessions in the shadows of strip clubs and Waffle Houses,

drunks wandering up to the latest fish kill,

and chemical clouds—

in the air and in the water—

erupting from the well-lit energy plants.

And the rivers of detritus also flow across the floors of the chicken plant,

and the young workers have blood under their yellow gumboots.

There are so many rivers—

rivers I never want to see again,

rivers I want to swim in right now.

And the most winding river flows past

the plants and factories and the state prison,

all the way down to the forests and

the shallow bays of the man-made lakes,

where chihuahuas bounce in pontoon boats,

where the waves lap at the rugose coral.

I've seen more trees and more forests than fossils—

I have seen the dead, but I have also known the living.

I have known the old trees that hang on,

roots clinging to the eroding shoreline,

leaning but standing,

even in the wake of tornadoes and ice storms.

When you think you're out of the woods, there's another oak lurking around the corner.

But we'll go on living, adapting, thriving.

I'll be out microchipping cows instead of

branding them.

I'll be succoring tomatoes instead of

checking my granddad's tobacco patch.

And the hawk and the harrier still sit at their guard posts,

watching the people on the water,

watching the deer in the fields,

watching over all the things that flow through me.